

Sketch

Volume 13, Number 2

1946

Article 5

Body Blow

Mike Forrest*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1946 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Body Blow

Mike Forrest

Abstract

"It'll come about the first of the eighth," Doc Turner had told him in the humid locker room...

Body Blow

Mike Forrest

"I'LL come about the first of the eighth," Doc Turner had told him in the humid locker room. This was all he thought of, as the cool damp cloth slipped over his chest and down across the rippled midsection. As the ten-second bell sounded Jigger took a final swipe at his eye with the stiptic and clapped the rubber in his mouth in one sure move of his dumpy body, and leaning in close to Johnny's face, said, "Remember, feint him high and take him low."

Making a positive sign with his right glove, he mumbled, "Sure, Jigger," through the mouthpiece. Inhaling deeply, he leaned forward on his stool, feet cocked beneath him, awaiting the bell for the eighth.

The newspapers had played the fight up the same old way: "youth vs. experience," though Johnny had hardly thought of it in this light—to him Soldier Hannegan was just a means to an end—for the truth was, Johnny Adaro loved to fight.

He knew the brisk satisfaction of weathering a hail of jabs and crosses waiting for an opening—feeling them bounce like waves off a seawall. They were tough but he was tougher. He was neither sadistic nor cruel, but he measured happiness in power, and power in physical give and take.

He was on his feet now. Lightly and cautiously he moved out to the center of the ring and tapped leather with the tiring Soldier.

Just like Doc said, he thought. "He's ringwise," Doc had said. "He's a lefty, but he's an ol' man, Johnny." Johnny pictured the tassel that served as hair for Doc, the inevitable unlit cigar butt between the yellowed teeth—and remembered—"Do it my way, Johnny. Wait. Beat him on your own terms in a late round. When he begins to wilt, that right will start to sag—fake him high and jab low—a body blow and an uppercut will finish it."

As simple as that.

And it was.

The beginning of the eighth the soldier was ahead a few points with the rounds even. He could see the Soldier's eyes start to squint and the hairy, barrel-like chest begin to heave slightly and that right arm begin to sag. The Soldier covered for a jab and a cross and retaliated with his own nicely placed right, but the sting was gone as Johnny blocked and felt his way cautiously.

Then it was now.

Johnny saw the uncovered jaw, and his left elbow described a three-dimensional arc as his fist moved toward it sharply. The automaton before him, sensing the blow, raised his right a fraction and, too late, saw his mistake and Johnny's jab careening downward toward his extreme right midsection and he felt the stinging power of the blow and the breath dashed from his lungs. The Soldier was shaken visibly. Time and men were frozen as two minds struggled for appropriate reaction.

But Johnny Adaro's mind was not suspended for lack of equanimity, but rather by the split second exaltation, the efficacy of sheer physical triumph—like the first deep breath of clear, cold air on a winter's day.

The Soldier moved to a crouch position now, trying to pull his elbows in to his midsection, and protect his face by covering behind the gloves, but Johnny's right, reenforced by shoulder, back and calf, raced the eight inches to the relaxed midriff before the Soldier could pull the inanimate left in, and Johnny felt the Soldier's insides drop away as the unerring blow went home.

To say that he was unfeeling would be an anachronism—for action and sentiment are askew. Rather, the satiated ego dictated a sense of good workmanship. The blow had been clean, accurate and fair. It felt right. Later—Much later there would be a kindly thought for the Soldier, concise . . . sincere.

The Soldier slumped and the slashing right moved upward in

devastating coordination with the lithe legs straightening from a slight crouch.

The uppercut drove the Soldier back on the canvas and Johnny watched from the neutral corner during the count. Then he saw something familiar. Something in the Soldier was trying to get up—to go on. What was it? He'd knocked men out before and he knew that physically the Soldier was through. He knew too that it couldn't be his mind, for twice himself he'd felt the blurred mental awe that came with the blows of defeat. Was there a third factor in the makeup of a man? An Unknown? . . . Something that couldn't be hammered down by a jab or a hook? He thought of Maria, the legless flower-girl who always seemed so happy when he'd stopped to pick up a bouquet for Mary. She'd liked him and once they'd had a long talk, but he'd ended it abruptly when she told him it was too bad people felt so sorry for her because actually she had more than most of them, and when he'd asked her what she meant she'd perplexed him with her reply, "I gained in the race for life when I lost my legs." Embarrassed, by his own incomprehensibility, and by the candid reference to her condition, he blurted, "I don't see how anyone could be happy without his legs." As the words fell on his ears and reduced themselves to a vicious banality, he could only choke out "Sorry, I wasn't thinkin'," as he hurried off with the picture of her eyes still in his mind.

They were filled with intensity; hurt, pride, kindness, determination . . . yet something else, something Johnny understood . . . an indescribable power utterly embraced by his senses, though unapproached by his mind.

Suddenly he felt his hand being extended into the air, and for the first time since he'd climbed between the ropes he was aware of the crowd.

With their shouts of "Attaboy Johnny," and "Next Champ," the fruits of victory were warm about him as he thought of the money, writeups, pictures, how proud Mary would be, and he knew the flower girl would be glad to know too, though he wasn't sure why he felt it. What had she meant by the race for life? He'd never hurried in his life except in the ring, and to the table after a heavy workout, and look where he was now.

The soap stung his eyes as he stood in the shower and blinked them open for a photographer who'd asked for "a little human interest, Johnny." He threw back the tousled head with an eye-catching grin as the flash went off, and the folds of success lined the water, in making a warm, comfortable coat for him.



Different Day

Mary Jo Overholt

Today is the same old day
As yesterday
The day before and all the winters—

Cold steals down again from a soggy sky;
It's going to snow. . . .

Grey tissue-paper ashes out of a pale grey sky
Show suddenly against dark trees
As great white feathers
And plop in complete stillness
At our feet.

I stand here watching
As on countless times before. . . .

The wind sweeps down from a hostile sky
Swirling and driving the snow before it
Never to come to rest;
The lakewater surges in endless swells and
Breaks in swift wild terror on icy bluffs
And slides eternally out again.

And you are here. . . .
I look back to the storm
And all is new along the beach.

There is the sun—
I have never seen the sun before today.